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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 008191

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDED MARKINGS FOR PARA. 4 AND 5)

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

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SUBJECT: TRANSPARENCY WITH A SMILE: GOE MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

Classified By: HMahoney, 1.4b

¶1. (C) In an Oct. 24 meeting with the Ambassador, Information Minister Anas al Fekki did his part to make the GOE's plans for the November Parliamentary elections look transparent and fair. The approach may in fact lead to gains for transparency and freedom, in both politics and the GOE-dominated broadcast media. Al Fekki's plan gives airtime to opposition and independent candidates, allows media and civil society activists to tour the polls, and informs voters about voting procedures during the Nov. 27-Dec. 7 Parliamentary campaign. To kick it off, the normally media shy Interior Minister will appear on TV on Oct. 25 to announce see-through ballot boxes. "And he will smile," al Fekki said. The liberal look at election time is the first step in what the Minister describes as a strategy to privatize large chunks of Egypt's government-controlled TV. End Summary.

Free Airtime --Even for the MB

¶2. (C) Following appearances on popular TV talk shows by the Interior Minister and Al Fekki himself, candidates from the ruling party and the opposition plus independents will all have their say on the air. National TV will run daily panel discussions, in which groups of four or five rival party leaders will debate each other and be questioned by journalists on foreign policy, human rights, health care and other issues. As for the hundreds of independents, they will have five minutes each on one of the six regional channels plus follow up time for those who do well in the run-off vote. This includes Muslim Brothers running as independents, al Fekki noted, though neither parties nor candidates would be allowed to run their slogans; the MB's "Islam is the solution" will not appear on the screen, he said. (Al Fekki expected the MB to win a million out of 14-15 million votes and get 40 to 50 Parliamentary seats --a result which the GOE can live with, according to the Minister.)

Informing the Voters

¶3. (U) Thanking USAID for the offer to finance voter-education, Al Fekki stressed that the GOE would accept informal advice but could not be seen to be following U.S. directives and would pay for its own information campaign. The State Information Service (SIS) will run its website and insert fillers detailing how to vote into Al Ahram, Egypt's most widely circulated, and government-owned, daily. SIS will also maintain a media center at the downtown Nile Hilton where local and foreign journalists and NGOs can obtain lists of polling stations and other information. The Interior Ministry will publish voter lists and poll locations, and SIS will ensure that this information is widely distributed.

Access to the Polls

¶4. (C) According to Al Fekki, the Justice Minister will soon announce that local civil society organizations and the media will receive passes from the SIS enabling them to enter the polls on election day. (Post is checking the precise details. Egypt's government-owned Middle East News Agency (MENA) cited Justice Minister Abuleil as stating that local civic groups approved by a government-backed human rights council may monitor every stage up to the vote-count.)

Freer, More Private Airwaves

¶5. (C) In his long-term campaign to free Egyptian TV from the government's grip, Al Fekki outlined a plan, which the Prime Minister wants finalized in six to eight weeks. The Minister says he intends to privatize selected satellite channels and allow private and foreign franchising of terrestrial TV, which is widely watched by Egyptians too poor for a satellite dish. Pointing to state TV's one billion dollar deficit, the Minister said he wants to sell the Nilesat thematic channels that feature drama, culture and education to Egyptian or foreign interests and allow up to 100 percent private, though not foreign, ownership of the terrestrial TV. New digital technology will expand the terrestrials within 18 months from the current two channels to six. For the time being however, news channels would be excepted from privatization.

The private stations and most of the state TV's facilities would go into the government's Media City on Cairo's outskirts, which has ample room for new studios and broadcast facilities. The Minister mentioned that he would welcome a USAID-financed consultant to design a master plan for the overhaul of Egypt's airwaves, to include an FCC-like regulatory body.